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**CASE STUDY: THE WITHDRAWAL OF RUSSIAN
MILITARY FORCES FROM THE BALTIC STATES**

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***Advance Study Course 314:
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CASE STUDY: THE WITHDRAWAL OF RUSSIAN MILITARY FORCES FROM THE BALTIC STATES

INTRODUCTION

With the abrupt demise of the USSR in 1991, the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia regained the independence they had lost at the start of the Second World War. The opportunity for these new states to consolidate their sovereignty and build a stable future was clouded by one overriding geostrategic reality: Russia's continued dominating presence in the region. The Baltic littoral had been part of the Russian and Soviet empires with only sporadic interruption for more than two centuries. The history of harsh rule by Moscow had bred few optimists among the poets, professors and provincial politicians who found themselves thrust into positions of national leadership. Their strategic objective was unambiguous: to seize this chance to make a clean break with the Soviet past and begin reintegrating the Baltic states into Western economic and political systems. As they set about this task, though, they soon confronted a dilemma: all roads to full Baltic sovereignty seemed to cut across what Russia viewed as its vital national interests. Resolving this dilemma was nothing less than a question of national survival, but as relatively weak, newly-independent states, the Baltics had little leverage to bring to bear in their dealings with Russia.

Moscow faced no less of a dilemma in its dealings with the Baltics. The geostrategic problems created by the loss of the Soviet empire were enormous. Virtually overnight, access to strategic defense assets in the Baltics had become a topic for negotiation with independent states. Ethnic Russians who had lived in the Baltics for decades became "instant aliens" among often hostile natives. And Russia's tradition of unquestioned influence in the region was endangered.

they regarded as Moscow's pretensions to great power status. Although Boris Yeltsin had come to power as a champion of Baltic independence, his idealism was soon overtaken by the realities of governing Russia as it struggled to define its interests in this traditional sphere of influence. Yeltsin's "Baltic dilemma" pitted Russia's historic interest in dominating the Baltics against the strategic imperative of good relations with the West, above all the United States, which regarded Russia's conduct toward its neighbors as a litmus test of Moscow's commitment to reform.

For the Clinton administration, which had launched an ambitious policy of support for Russian reform early in 1993, the stakes in this game were high. Because of strong pro-Baltic sentiment throughout the government and especially in Congress, domestic support for the Clinton policy toward Russia was jeopardized to the extent that Russia was perceived as pursuing a policy of intimidation toward Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. As the Russia-Baltic dialogue began to deteriorate in 1993, pressure increased on Washington to abandon its role as a neutral observer and enter the fray.

The account that follows describes how this confluence of interests among the Baltic states, Russia and the United States culminated over a single issue that became the central focus of the Russia-Baltic dialogue: the effort to secure the final withdrawal of Russian military forces from the Baltics. Prepared as a three-part "case study" in international affairs, the narrative is consciously non-analytical in nature: the goal is to present the circumstantial details of the issue much as the actual participants experienced them, thereby encouraging readers to dissect and analyze the strategic choices and ponder the options for themselves. In the most basic terms, then, what follows is a story of conflicting strategic interests -- one that highlights the dilemma faced by a small, relatively powerless state as it struggles for leverage in its relations with a

bilateral discussions between states, and, perhaps most intriguingly, one that describes how direct diplomatic engagement at the highest levels of state can produce outcomes that are both utterly decisive and wholly unanticipated

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PART A: INDEPENDENCE WITHOUT SOVEREIGNTY

On August 20, 1991, world attention focused on Moscow, as a group of reactionary government and military officials struggled to oust Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and reverse his efforts to reform the domestic and foreign policies of the USSR. With the outcome of the attempted coup still in doubt, leaders in the Baltic republics met in their respective capitals, determined to exploit the confusion and weakness in Moscow to realize a long-term dream: a final, formal severing of all ties with the USSR by means of declarations re-establishing Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia as independent, sovereign states. Estonia's parliament issued its proclamation August 20, the second day of the coup. The Latvian statement followed the next day, and was published in the Soviet press alongside stories reporting Gorbachev's return to Moscow in the wake of the failure of the coup. Taken together with the independence declaration issued by Lithuania in 1990, the Latvian and Estonian moves constituted the first acts in the physical dissolution of the Soviet state. Any fears that this tide might somehow be reversed evaporated three days later, on August 24, 1991, when Russian President Boris Yeltsin -- riding a crest of strength generated by his dramatic opposition to the coup attempt -- formally recognized the independence of the Baltic nations. Recognition by the international community quickly followed.¹

occupation could not be erased by formal declarations. More than any of the other "captive nations" in the Soviet empire, the Baltic peoples had always exhibited -- even flaunted -- a bitter contempt for Moscow's rule. Their resentment was rooted in the Soviet attempts at "Russification" of the ethnic republics, a policy that had led to the forced exile to Siberia of tens of thousands of Baltic citizens and the "colonization" of ethnic Russians and other non-indigenbus groups in the Baltics. By 1989, ethnic Russians and other non-Baltic nationalities made up 38 percent of the population in Estonia. In Latvia, the corresponding figure was 48 percent.² While the ratio of outsiders to natives was lower in Lithuania, anti-Russian sentiment was just as high, especially in the wake of Soviet attacks on pro-independence forces in early 1991 that had left at least 20 Lithuanians dead.³

Exacerbating these tensions was the continued presence in the Baltics of Russian military forces. Throughout the Soviet period, the Baltic peoples had always regarded the troops as little more than an occupying army. Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union had begun a general drawdown of forces throughout Eastern Europe, rank-and-file troops had begun leaving the Baltics as well. By the time the USSR ceased to exist in 1991, the total number of Soviet/Russian troops in the Baltics was estimated at 130,000.⁴ As Russia rotated enlisted personnel out of the region, though, the Russian officer corps in the Baltics began to resist pressure to withdraw as well. Most lived off-base with their families in comfortable apartments, many had been stationed in the Baltics for years. The Russian press was filled with stories of officers and their families returning to Russia to live in tents -- or worse -- due to an acute housing shortage and reduced funding for the military. The many officers whose departure would coincide with retirement faced even greater uncertainties. Clearly, the best alternative for

in place,” and pressed the Baltic governments to grant the officers and their families the right to permanent residency and housing. Baltic officials, of course, saw things quite differently. Already concerned about the large minority of Russian civilians involuntarily “stranded” on their territories, they were loath to consider any concessions to Russian military officers, whose continued presence might constitute a potential “fifth column” and thus posed a grave threat to nascent Baltic independence. Resolving this clash of interests became the central focus of the Russian-Baltic dialogue 1992-1994, as both sides struggled to overcome the legacy of the past and develop a *modus vivendi* for the future.

Negotiating Normality

The Russian troop presence was only the most conspicuous of a host of problems created by the sudden independence of the Baltics in August 1991, and the just-as-abrupt dissolution of the Soviet Union four months later. Only weeks after the formal demise of the USSR, Russian President Yeltsin dispatched a high-level emissary to the Baltics to begin the process of normalizing relations, negotiating the division of assets, and providing for the orderly withdrawal of Russian military forces. By February 1992, bilateral talks had begun between Russia and each Baltic state. The early phase of these negotiations was conducted in an atmosphere that was at least businesslike, if not overly warm. Experts on both sides worked steadily through the myriad of legal and technical issues (e.g., what license plates Russian military trucks should carry, the legal status of a soldier during the withdrawal period, etc.). At the highest level, supportive statements contributed to an atmosphere of optimism. Yeltsin himself had been an early champion of Baltic independence, by mid-1992, during a meeting of the G-7 considering economic aid for Russia, he declared that “a political decision has been made to withdraw the

troops completely”⁵ Most importantly, the slow but steady exodus of Russian military forces from the Baltics and elsewhere continued

As the negotiations wore on, though, it was becoming increasingly clear that the reservoir of good will on both sides was limited. Many commentators had likened the Russo-Baltic talks to negotiations over the division of assets in the wake of a divorce. And, like many a divorce proceeding, what began on the basis of good will and mutual respect soon turned sour. Juri Luik, who headed the Estonian delegation to the talks and later served as his country's Foreign Minister 1994-95, saw a collision looming from the start

Russian interests were different [from those of the Baltics] because they wanted to achieve an agreement that would legitimize the presence of the troops, at least temporarily. It boiled down to the fact that the Russian aim was to prolong the process as long as they could. Our aim was to speed it up as much as possible. For us, the main issue was the date -- when will the troops leave. The Baltic governments were absolutely not ready to have a prolonged agreement for a certain time period [during which] the presence of the troops would be legitimized by the agreement.⁶

As the negotiations progressed through 1992, the issues under discussion began to acquire a more political flavor: the rights of Russian officers under Estonian or Latvian law, criteria for determining eligibility for residence permits, transit across Lithuania to the Russian military enclave at Kaliningrad. In public statements, Russian officials began to use words like “discrimination” to describe Baltic policies toward the Russian minority, linking their concerns to Moscow's willingness to continue pulling out its troops. President Yeltsin himself suggested that the pace of the withdrawal would depend on the extent of international aid to finance the building of housing for returning officers.

At a summit meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in July 1992, the Baltic delegations joined forces and threatened to block approval of the final

CSCE report until it included a paragraph calling for agreements to be concluded on the “early, orderly and complete withdrawal” of foreign troops from the Baltics. Pressured by other CSCE members, Moscow acquiesced in the adoption of this language, amounting to a formal Russian “promise” to withdraw, effectively countersigned by the other CSCE members. Hailed in the Baltics, the language came under sharp attack in Moscow, especially from nationalist elements in the Supreme Soviet, Russia’s holdover Soviet-era parliament.

Moscow’s Response

In the wake of the CSCE summit, Russian officials adopted a harder line. At a meeting with his Baltic counterparts on August 6, 1992, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev laid down Moscow’s conditions for an “early, orderly and complete withdrawal”: legal status for Russian forces during the withdrawal period, housing for returning troops, guarantees of pensions and “human rights” for Russian military retirees and their families who would remain in the Baltics after the withdrawal, no compensation claims against Russia for damages inflicted during the occupation period. Kozyrev also put Latvia and Estonia on notice over two Russian strategic installations on their territory that Russia would need to operate for an indefinite period after the troops were out: an early-warning radar site at Skrunda, Latvia, and a training and maintenance base for Russian nuclear submarines at Paldiski, Estonia. Finally, the Russian foreign minister called on the Baltic states to change laws that discriminated against the political and economic rights of the large ethnic Russian population residing in the Baltic states.

The Baltic response to Kozyrev’s terms was cool, proceeding from the legal position that since Russian troops had always been in the Baltics illegally, their withdrawal could not be subject to conditions. Possessing little in the way of concrete leverage over Moscow, however,

on which they could not and would not compromise. Regarding Moscow's demands for compensation, it came to be accepted that Baltic claims for damages against Moscow over five decades of occupation would be offset by the value of equipment and infrastructure left behind when the Russians left (though the degree of that offset was highly negotiable). The Paldiski and Skrunda sites were more contentious. Any suggestion that Latvia or Estonia would sanction even a short-term Russian military presence after the general withdrawal was completed was politically explosive. Finally, with regard to Russia's insistence on legal guarantees for its civilian populations, Baltic officials drew a distinction of principle: this highly charged, emotional issue must in no way become linked to the withdrawal talks, lest Russian domestic political pressures become a driving force behind the negotiations.

The Lithuanian Way

On September 9, 1992, the Russian and Lithuanian defense ministries approved a bilateral agreement setting August 31, 1993 as the deadline for withdrawal of all Russian troops from Lithuania. Russia's willingness to set a date for a relatively rapid withdrawal from Lithuania stemmed from several factors. First, as noted, the population of ethnic Russians in Lithuania was relatively small and -- from Moscow's perspective, at least -- had fared rather better at the hands of the Lithuanians than had their compatriots in Latvia and Estonia.⁷ In addition, Russia had no strategic military facilities in Lithuania akin to the Skrunda radar site in Latvia or Paldiski in Estonia. Finally, Moscow needed good relations with Vilnius to ensure easy access to Kaliningrad, the exclave on the Baltic Sea that was physically separated from the rest of Russia by now-sovereign Lithuanian territory.

pressure Vilnius over the issue of compensation for the facilities that Russian forces were abandoning. Lithuania fought back, announcing it would block Russia's entry into the Council of Europe unless the August 31 deadline were met. Sweden and other European nations expressed support for the Lithuanian position. The United States weighed in on August 23, when senior officials in Washington noted that U.S. law required a cutoff of development assistance to Russia if troops remained in Lithuania.⁸ Ultimately, the standoff was resolved in a telephone discussion between Russian President Yeltsin and Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas, in which Yeltsin agreed that the August 31 deadline would be met. Compensation and other issues were deferred for later resolution.

And Then There Were Two

As the three Baltic states struggled for leverage against the Russians in the withdrawal negotiations, their unity had always provided a measure of strength to their effort. As long as the issue could be described in terms of a pull-out of Russian troops from "the Baltics", it was afforded a higher visibility internationally. The August 31, 1993 withdrawal from Lithuania changed the balance, and spotlighted the strategy of "Baltic differentiation" that Moscow had been pursuing for months. President Yeltsin had signaled the differentiation in a press conference following his first meeting with new U.S. President Clinton on April 4, 1993.

we are completing the withdrawal of troops from Lithuania, as Lithuania does not violate human rights and treats the Russian-speaking population with respect. As Latvia and Estonia violate human rights, since according to their national legislation national minorities, mostly Russians, are persecuted, and that involves basically Russians, we will link the withdrawal schedule with the human rights situation there, although we have adopted a political decision to pull the troops out of the republics.⁹

Latvia's negotiations were continually upset by the stumbling block of Skrunda, as the Russians continued to insist on maintaining the strategic radar site until 1999. Estonia, meanwhile, had suffered a serious setback in its dialogue with Russia in June 1993, when the parliament in Tallinn adopted a law on aliens that seemed designed to exclude Russians. Under the law, anyone living in Estonia who was not already a citizen was required to apply for a residence permit. Those who failed to apply or failed to meet Estonian standards for granting such permits might put their continued residence in Estonia at risk. Russian reaction to the law was swift and sharp. Foreign Minister Kozyrev said Estonia "had taken a step along the road to apartheid."¹⁰ President Yeltsin, in a statement issued June 24, observed that the Estonian leadership, under the influence of nationalism, seemed to have "forgotten" certain geopolitical realities -- realities that Russia could remind them of.¹¹

Moscow: The Hardening Line

Thus, any relief felt by officials in Riga and Tallinn over the Russian pull-out from Lithuania on August 31, 1993 was clouded by the realization that their cases would now be much tougher. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Churkin had told a press conference during the Lithuanian endgame that Russia had been "too kind" to the Lithuanians by beginning to withdraw troops before an agreement had been signed. Moscow, he said, would not repeat this mistake with Latvia and Estonia.¹² Churkin's comments reflected the shifting center of political gravity in Russia. By early 1993, conservative nationalist forces centered in the Supreme Soviet, Russia's holdover parliament from the USSR-era, had gathered strength and begun challenging the policies of Yeltsin and Kozyrev. A lightning rod for their dissatisfaction was the military withdrawal from the Baltics -- in conservative eyes, a unilateral concession that reduced

Reassertion of Russia's rights in the so-called "near abroad" (the former republics of the USSR that now lay outside Russia's borders) became a rallying cry for those who sought to widen Russia's sphere of influence. In two specific instances, in the newly-independent states of Moldova and Georgia, rogue Russian military forces had reportedly become involved on the side of separatists fighting against government forces.

Against this backdrop, the slow progress and frequent setbacks in the withdrawal talks appeared ominous to Baltic officials, who began to sense that they might be playing against time. By December 1993, it looked as though the clock might have run out altogether. In elections for the new Russian parliament, reformist candidates and parties suffered unanticipated defeats against communists and nationalists. In Baltic eyes, the most egregious symbol of the rightward tilt in Moscow was the flamboyant ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, whose party captured close to twenty percent of the parliamentary vote. Zhirinovskiy's expansionist plans for Russia included the re-annexation of the Baltics, among his numerous inflammatory comments, the most often quoted was his threat to build giant fans along the Russian frontier to blow radioactive gas into the Baltics. Statements by mainstream Russian officials were only slightly more reassuring, as they scurried to shore up their right flanks. President Yeltsin's New Year's Day address promised that 1994 would mark a more "energetic" defense of the 25 million ethnic Russians resident in neighboring states.¹³ Foreign Minister Kozyrev, who had suffered through 1993 as prime object of communist-nationalist wrath, now stated that Russian troops should remain stationed throughout the "near abroad" to prevent creation of security vacuum on Russia's borders.¹⁴

Skrunda: Strategic Necessity -- or Trojan Horse?

In Latvia, concern over the rightward shift in rhetoric and politics in Moscow was compounded by frustration over the stalemate in the negotiations over Skrunda. Located near Latvia's coast on the Baltic Sea, the Skrunda installation had for decades provided the USSR with advance warning of enemy ballistic missile attacks. U.S. and Western officials agreed with Moscow's argument that forcing Russia to close Skrunda prematurely, before a new facility could be built to replace it, would leave a destabilizing "blind spot" in Russia's strategic field of vision. Latvian government officials, on the other hand, found themselves under pressure from domestic hard-liners who viewed Skrunda as a kind of Russian Trojan horse, whose continued operation would provide the KGB with a base of operations from which to threaten Latvia's security indefinitely.

The key concept here was "indefinitely," since by December of 1993 the Latvian government had been persuaded that some operation of Skrunda beyond the withdrawal deadline was inevitable. But how long was long enough? Russian negotiators had spoken of occupancy ranging from six to ten years. The Latvians found this term excessive but, inexperienced in the technicalities, were unable to field a credible counterproposal. Assuming they could arrive at one, how would they sell it -- not just to the Russians, but to a skeptical domestic political opposition and public? As 1993 came to a close, these unanswered questions and the increasingly strident talk out of Moscow combined to strain Latvia's fragile ruling coalition to the breaking point.

Declaring the Deadline Inoperative

On the Estonian side, negotiators faced a similar stalemate with even more discouraging prospects. Despite some movement on the margins, the talks had shown no progress on the

August 31, 1994 The Russian side had finally put this deadline into a formal proposal, but it was heavily conditioned on fulfillment of a number of other provisions construction of additional housing in Russia for departing troops, liberal standards for determining the right of retiring Russian officers to remain in Estonia, and a protracted presence at the Paldiski nuclear site Consistent with their position that the troop presence was illegal and thus not subject to conditions, Estonian negotiators sought to pocket the Russian date and avoid discussion of what they considered unrelated issues

Given the change in tone in Moscow's public statements about its minority populations abroad, and pressure from the right on Yeltsin and Kozyrev to drive a hard bargain in reasserting Russia's prerogatives as a great power, it was clear this stalemate could not go on indefinitely The axe fell on March 9, 1994, in the final plenary session of what was, by then, the 17th round of the Russian-Estonian talks Vassily Svirin, head of the Russian delegation, stated bluntly that the Estonian side had continued "to insist on its previous positions on issues relating to the situation of the Russian-speaking population and has shown no desire to hold a constructive discussion of a draft treaty on settling citizenship issues " Accordingly, Svirin went on, the Russian delegation was forced to state officially that Russia's proposal on withdrawing its forces by August 31, made as a good will gesture, was no longer operative Henceforth, the withdrawal would proceed in accordance with a timetable drawn up by the Russian side ¹⁵

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PART B: PLAYING THE WESTERN CARD

As the young Baltic states struggled to consolidate their sovereignty and assert their independence from Moscow in 1991 and 1992, they had benefitted from significant support from

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway viewed them as fellow Nordic states, and had acted as diplomatic mentors to the newly-independent governments after they broke off from the USSR. In the United States, pro-Baltic sentiment had become an ingrained political feature of American policy throughout the Cold War, founded on the refusal of ten successive administrations to recognize the forcible incorporation of the three nations into the Soviet Union. The Baltics had strong defenders in Congress, as well: nearly one million Americans traced their ancestry back to Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, constituting a well-organized and influential ethnic lobby.

American and European officials had followed the many twists and turns in the troop withdrawal negotiations with great concern -- and not solely because of their sympathy toward the Baltics. The outcome of the process was widely regarded in the West as a litmus test of Russia's intentions. As Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt put it,

Russian conduct toward these states will show the true nature of Russia's commitment to international norms and principles. If Moscow fully accepts the independence of the Baltic states and fully respects their rights, one can be sure that Moscow has entered the family of nations.¹⁶

Washington, in particular, had special stake in a favorable outcome. Only weeks after his inauguration, President Clinton had launched an ambitious policy to remake U.S.-Russia relations, heralded in a major policy address entitled "A Strategic Alliance with Russian Reform." Its central tenet was an activist effort to reach out to Russia during its painful transition to a new order, simultaneously bolstering the movement toward markets and democracy and breaking down seven decades of mistrust and hostility. Domestic support for this policy was endangered to the extent that the American people and the Congress perceived that Russia was practicing the politics of intimidation in its relations with neighboring states.

Strobe Talbott, an early architect of the policy as the State Department official in charge of relations with the former Soviet Union, recalled the special priority accorded the troop withdrawal issue as the new administration formulated its policy

There was a meeting with the President very early on where we talked about the Baltics. And we identified getting the Russian troops out of the Baltics as exceedingly important, comparable to the goal of getting Russian nuclear weapons out of Ukraine while bolstering Ukraine's security and independence¹⁷

In their first meeting in April 1993, Clinton and Yeltsin discussed ways in which the exodus of Russian troops from the Baltics could be speeded. Yeltsin identified lack of housing for returning officers as a problem, and made clear that U.S. help might expedite the withdrawal. In response, Clinton proposed a project that would use \$5 million in U.S. aid to build 450 housing units at several sites in Russia. The offer was well received by the Russian military, and by the time of the next Clinton-Yeltsin meeting in July 1993, the U.S. had expanded the program by another 5000 units at a total value of \$165 million -- then the largest single foreign assistance project in the U.S. budget¹⁸

In all, U.S. assistance to Russia during the first year of the Clinton administration totaled nearly \$1 billion. As doubts about Moscow's intentions toward its neighbors grew in the wake of the Duma elections and the stalled troop withdrawal talks, Congress adopted several measures mandating a cutoff in U.S. assistance to Russia in the absence of "significant progress" toward withdrawal of its military forces from the new independent states of the former USSR¹⁹

Nicholas Burns, Senior Director on the National Security Council Staff for Russian and Baltic affairs, saw U.S. engagement with Russia over the issue growing more contentious

As time went on we began to see Russia reasserting itself -- in the involvement of the Russian military in the secessionist crisis in Georgia, for instance. The critics charged that the U.S. was backing Russia as a "re-

colonizing power” So while we continued to try to work with Russia and encourage those moves it was making in the right direction, we also served notice that progress in the Baltics was something of a litmus test of Yeltsin’s commitment to change The President raised it in every phone call and letter to Yeltsin during that period²⁰

Clinton met the Baltic Presidents in New York on September 27, 1993, and underscored his support for the troop withdrawal issue At that meeting, Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis described the dilemma his negotiators faced trying to arrive at a viable compromise on Skrunda In subsequent encounters, Latvian officials asked the U S to provide its best estimate of a reasonable post-withdrawal occupancy of Skrunda By early January, with President Clinton preparing to travel to Moscow for a summit meeting with Yeltsin, American experts had come up with an answer -- and an offer Latvia’s Ambassador to Washington, Ojars Kalnins, played a key role in the diplomatic dialogue

It was in early January that [the National Security Council staff] contacted me and suggested a compromise time period -- that the Russians could operate Skrunda for four years after withdrawal, and then take another eighteen months to dismantle the facility and withdraw The NSC asked, hypothetically, if the U S were to propose this to Yeltsin [during the upcoming Moscow summit], and Yeltsin were to accept, would Latvia find this acceptable?²¹

The Latvian government faced a dilemma Initially, it had sided with the country’s rightist parties, who held to the position that Skrunda must be closed concurrent with the withdrawal of the last Russian troops But although the Russians had dropped their insistence on keeping a number of other installations open after the withdrawal, they had made it clear they could not compromise on Skrunda Now the United States and other friendly countries in the West were counseling Latvia to accept a limited “rental period” for Skrunda as well -- advice that was made even harder to resist by Clinton’s offer to seal the deal personally with Yeltsin on Latvia’s behalf Latvian officials realized that there was no other real option On January 11,

1994, Foreign Minister Georgs Andrejevs sent word back to the NSC staff -- by now on the ground in Moscow with the President -- that the government could accept, albeit reluctantly, the proposal as outlined and would authorize President Clinton to present it as a Latvian proposal in his meeting with Yeltsin. The President and National Security Adviser Anthony Lake agreed that the chances of convincing Yeltsin to accept the offer were good enough to warrant the unusual step of having the President play a direct intermediary role. In the meeting, Yeltsin agreed to the formula -- by now dubbed the "four-plus-eighteen" solution -- almost immediately.²²

After his return to Washington, on January 20, the President telephoned Latvian President Ulmanis to report Russia's acceptance of the offer. Ulmanis expressed his gratitude for the U S intervention, but also described the tough job he would face in selling the deal to the opposition, who were already leveling charges that the government had sold out to Russia under pressure from Washington. Clinton invited Ulmanis to send a delegation of opposition parliamentarians to Washington, where U S experts would explain the strategic rationale for keeping Skrunda open.²³ The leaders of Latvia's major parliamentary factions, led by Foreign Minister Andrejevs, visited Washington February 1-2 for an extraordinary round of meetings, including a session with the President, Vice President, and National Security Adviser Lake.²⁴ Nicholas Burns described it as "the ultimate diplomatic full-court press," made even more effective, in the eyes of Latvian Ambassador Kalnins, by some multilateral packaging.

It was a critical couple of days, because it allowed the parliamentarians to go back and take a strong position on this. And it was an example of U S - European cooperation, since there were German and Swedish diplomats present in the meetings at the White House. Convincing the parliament that this wasn't just a U S initiative made people feel more at ease. Because there was always a suspicion back then that the U S is making a deal with Russia, that it's a big power accommodation and we're caught in the middle.

So if the Swedes said it was okay, and the Germans said it was okay, then obviously it wasn't just the superpowers dealing over our heads²⁵

Disarmed by the high-level meetings and a generous offer of U S and Swedish financial assistance (eventually totaling over \$7 million) to help with Skrunda's dismantlement, the Latvian lawmakers returned to Riga and voiced their support for the deal. President Yeltsin met Latvian President Ulmanis in Moscow on April 30, 1994, to sign the agreement fixing August 31, 1994 as the date for the withdrawal of the final Russian forces from Latvia. According to a second agreement, Skrunda would continue to operate as a Russian installation until 1998, followed by the 18 month dismantlement period, staffed by 758 Russian "civilians" (i.e., non-uniformed military). Finally, Latvia agreed to grant permanent residence to Russian military pensioners who had retired in Latvia before January 1992, when Russia formally took control of the Russian military²⁶

Estonia: The Last Apple on the Tree

The view from Tallinn on April 30, 1994, the date of the Yeltsin-Ulmanis agreement in Moscow, was mixed. While the fact that Russia had made a formal promise at the highest level to withdraw its forces by a date certain from a second Baltic nation was a positive development, little else about the deal gave the Estonians cause for optimism. The Latvian agreement left the Estonians alone -- the only country in the region without a clear idea of when the troops would leave. Secondly, the content of the agreement, especially the provisions to keep Skrunda operational, was viewed very negatively.²⁷ The Estonians had their own version of Skrunda to deal with -- the Soviet-era nuclear submarine training facility at Paldiski. As with Skrunda, the Russians were insisting they needed additional time beyond the withdrawal deadline to properly dismantle and clean up the facility, as with Skrunda, Western experts were advising the Estonians that insisting the Russians abandon Paldiski immediately was problematic.

Although Estonian officials recognized that some post-withdrawal occupancy of Paldiski was probably inevitable, the four-year precedent for Skrunda would not work in the Estonian domestic atmosphere. Like the Latvians, Estonian officials had come to rely on support from Europe and the United States to make up for the leverage they themselves lacked in their dealings with Moscow. The Russian declaration on March 9, 1994 that it was pulling the August 31 withdrawal date off the table provoked a good deal of international criticism. The Nordic Council, the European Union, and the State Department all issued statements reiterating their expectation that Moscow would honor its commitment to the August deadline. But the Russian threat succeeded tactically in refocusing the Estonian leadership on the need to strike some kind of deal, a feeling that only intensified after the Russia-Latvia agreements were signed.

The March 1994 breakdown in the Russia-Estonia negotiations set off alarm bells among U S officials. President Clinton's personal efforts to broker a deal between Latvia and Russia over Skrunda had heightened his own interest in the troop withdrawal, thereby raising the issue several notches on the scale of foreign policy priorities. The April agreement between Latvia and Russia was, from Washington's perspective, a major success -- and an effective counter to increasing charges that Russia was bent on consolidating its sphere of influence in neighboring countries, most ominously in the Baltics. To capitalize on the success of the Russian-Latvian agreement and demonstrate continued U S support for the Baltics, the White House decided to add a stop in Latvia to the itinerary of the European trip the President would make to attend the G-7 summit in Naples in early July²⁸. As the first visit ever by a sitting U S President to a free and independent Baltic nation, the stop would have tremendous symbolic significance. But as an additional benefit, the White House saw a new opportunity for President Clinton to play the role of intermediary, via discussions he would have with Estonian President Lennart Meri in Riga on July 6, followed by a meeting with Yeltsin in Naples four days later²⁹.

In Tallinn, Estonian Foreign Minister Juri Luik accepted the offer of a U S role a go-between put forth by Ambassador Robert Frasure. The Estonians had for some months sounded Moscow out on the possibility of a meeting between Meri and Yeltsin, the responses were consistently discouraging. Clearly the negotiations had reached the stage where political decisions agreed at the highest level were essential. Frasure and Luik agreed that the Estonian proposal to resolve the final sticking points should be contained in a letter from President Meri that President Clinton would present to Yeltsin when they met in Naples. The Estonian side

The main issues at that point boiled down to the rights of living permits for Russian officers -- how many could remain, and how would the review process [to determine officer to be excluded for security reasons] go on. We wanted the process to be based on Estonian legislation. So the foreign ministry worked out the proposal, and then the draft went to Meri who was obviously the one to sign it, and he added some personal details, the kind of rhetoric that was necessary for a personal flavor.³⁰

Carefully choreographed behind the scenes, the meeting between Presidents Clinton and Meri occurred in Riga on July 6, 1994. NSC Senior Director Burns recalled the exchange

President Clinton said 'how would it be if I offered to take a very realistic proposal from you on the troop withdrawal personally to President Yeltsin?'

And President Meri was all prepared. he said 'Mr. President, I accept your offer, and I will communicate my proposal to you in Naples through your Ambassador, Mr. Frasure.' And, true to his word, Meri met with Frasure and Bob cabled [the proposal] to us from Tallinn to Naples, and we had it typed up, and the President handed it to Yeltsin. And the President was able to say 'I've been able to work out with President Meri, on the basis of my July 6 meeting with him in Riga, the following offer. And I can vouch for its good offices and its integrity and sincerity.'³¹

Yeltsin's reaction to the Meri letter (which the U.S. side had had translated into Russian to facilitate immediate discussion) seemed positive. In particular, the Estonian position on Paldiski, which moved away from their earlier maximalist "no tenancy" stand and agreed to a twelve-month period of dismantlement after the withdrawal, was seen as a step forward. Most importantly, Yeltsin promised Clinton that he would meet with Meri.

As the meeting broke up, Burns headed for a telephone to call Luik with news that the discussions had gone well, but first stopped to listen to the joint Clinton-Yeltsin press conference. In his opening statement, Clinton noted a "promising development in the Baltics." He described how he had passed Meri's ideas to Yeltsin, which Yeltsin had promised to give his full attention to. "I believe," the President concluded, "that the differences between the two sides have been narrowed and that an agreement can be reached in the near future so that the troops

would be able to withdraw by the end of August ” Then Yeltsin took the first question from U S correspondent Helen Thomas

Q Will you have all Russian troops out of the Baltics by August 31?

President Yeltsin No I -- nice question I like the question, because I can say no We took out of Lithuania -- we removed 31st of August [1993] with a drumbeat, and we're going to take that last soldier from Latvia Now Estonia [is a] somewhat more difficult relationship since there in Estonia, there are very crude violations of human rights, vis-à-vis the Russian-speaking population, especially toward military pensioners I promised Bill [Clinton] that I will meet with the President of Estonia We're going to discuss these issues, and after, we're going to try to find a solution to this question ³²

Burns and others in the U S delegation were dumbfounded by Yeltsin's "nyet" in the press conference, since it diverged so strongly from the tone and substance of the private discussion on the Baltics with Clinton Although the outcome of the meeting was positive -- Yeltsin had, after all, agreed to meet with Meri -- the "nyet" hung in the air like a bad odor Burns hurried to call Luik, who had been watching the press conference on CNN As Luik recalled it

We were rather surprised, because we thought they would have given at least a more positive outcome or that the Russians wouldn't say anything publicly and keep a lower profile But obviously they had a rather strong reaction It became one of the major issues -- the press [in Estonia] became focused on the apparent contradiction between the American and Russian view of what should be done ³³

U S officials felt that the best way to get beyond the negative perception left by the Naples press conference was to ensure that Yeltsin kept his word to schedule a meeting with Meri To that end, Clinton wrote Yeltsin a follow-up letter the week after their meeting urging him to schedule the meeting as soon as possible and fulfill his pledge to get the troops out

We were informed first by the Americans and later by the Russians that there will probably be a meeting between the two Presidents. But the Russians didn't tell us the date. Then it somehow melted out from somewhere that it might be the 26th of July. But there was no letter from the Russians requesting to come to Moscow -- no letter from Yeltsin, no letter from anybody.³⁵

Despite the absence of a formal invitation to meet, the Russian-Estonian working-level talks were reconstituted to prepare the groundwork for a meeting, headed on the Estonian side by Foreign Ministry Vice Chancellor Raul Malk, and on the Russian side by Deputy Foreign Minister Vitaliy Churkin. The two men met July 20-23 in Helsinki in an effort to iron out their differences. But the talks did not go well,³⁶ and there was still no formal invitation for Meri to visit Moscow. It was a tense period in Tallinn, as Juri Luik recalled afterward:

When it was the 24th already Meri was very angry, and he said 'if the letter doesn't come tomorrow morning, I don't go'. And obviously it was the right policy because there was literally nothing for the meeting to be based on, and there was the feeling that if we just arrived there someone could say, 'who told you to come?'³⁷

On July 24, Moscow finally sent a message through its Ambassador in Tallinn inviting Meri to meet with Yeltsin in Moscow on July 26. The two sides agreed to send Malk to Moscow to try once again to work out an agreement with Churkin. Those talks were even more acrimonious than the Helsinki sessions, and made no progress toward a draft agreement for the two Presidents to sign. As Meri and Luik rode to the airport on the morning of July 26, their expectations were extremely low.

We had tried of course to get some idea [from the Russians] of what will happen in Moscow, but they all emphasized that nothing will happen. So our expectations were low, and we were only worried about how we are going to explain it afterwards.³⁸

PART C: THE DENOUEMENT IN MOSCOW

Upon arrival in Moscow July 26, Estonian President Meri and Foreign Minister Luik met with Vice Chancellor Malk, who provided more details of his discouraging discussions with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Churkin. In the ideal world, the meetings between the Estonians and Russians in the days preceding Meri's trip to Moscow would have identified solutions to most if not all of the outstanding questions. It would then have fallen to the two presidents to decide the point of compromise on the remaining issues and to give their imprimatur to the deal as an agreement sealed at the highest level. But the Malk-Churkin meetings had failed to make any substantial progress. Moreover, it seemed to the Estonians that Churkin had been operating in the absence of any instructions to lay the groundwork for a productive Meri-Yeltsin meeting. His mood in the meetings was one of scarcely-controlled frustration, and he was unwilling or unable to engage substantively on the major outstanding issues: the "security" grounds on which Russian military or civilians might be denied the right to remain in Estonia, and the terms of Russia's post-withdrawal occupancy of the Paldiski nuclear training facility.

Meri, Luik and Malk arrived at Yeltsin's Kremlin office at 3 p.m. for a meeting that was scheduled to last ninety minutes. On the Russian side, accompanying Yeltsin, were Foreign Minister Kozyrev and presidential foreign affairs adviser Dmitry Ryurikov. Yeltsin opened the meeting by reading from a prepared text that described the situation in harsh terms, referring to Estonian stalling and complaining of Tallinn's inability to understand the problems that Moscow faced in ensuring the well-being of its soldiers and citizens. To Foreign Minister Luik, it seemed that Yeltsin had been prepared for the worst kind of meeting -- short and acrimonious. Sensing this, President Meri began his response on an opposite note.

[He] very skillfully changed the atmosphere totally, by speaking of the cultural and historical point of Russian-Estonian relations, and turned the tables. The discussion then took a more relaxed turn, and Yeltsin at some point said "well, what seems to be the problem, then?" And so we tried, with Kozyrev, to explain what the problem was, and to Yeltsin it didn't seem to be a very big problem.³⁹

As Meri described it to Yeltsin, Estonia's major concern was over its sovereign right to determine which of the Russian officers seeking permanent residence might constitute a threat to Estonia's security. Although as an issue of principle this did not seem to pose a major problem to the Russian President, the details were complicated, and neither Meri nor Yeltsin was prepared for any in-depth negotiating on the subject. It was suggested that the two Presidents break for a late lunch, leaving their foreign ministers to work out a resolution. For the next several hours, Luik and Kozyrev negotiated the final terms of the side agreement to the withdrawal treaty covering the "social guarantees" for the Russian minority in Estonia, reporting back intermittently to Meri and Yeltsin, who added their own comments. For Luik, it was the chance to finish the deal once and for all.

We hammered it together in very broad terms, and not in very good legal language. But we also had a very clear understanding that this was an opportunity for us. If you are the President of the U.S., to meet with Yeltsin is not so difficult. If you are the Estonian President, it's almost excluded as a possibility.⁴⁰

By the time the last compromise was struck, it was early evening in Moscow. Reporters were summoned to a hastily arranged signing ceremony, where Meri and Yeltsin put their signatures to the agreement on the troop pullout, thereby formalizing the Russian commitment to complete the withdrawal by August 31, and to the agreement on social guarantees that had literally just been concluded.⁴¹ Yeltsin later gave the press his interpretation of how the long-disputed issues had finally been worked out.

Estonia succeeded in agitating the West. I received letters from Bill Clinton and Helmut Kohl. They all had a slant toward the troop withdrawal. But Russia took a tough stand on the human rights issue. We managed to ensure that Russian [military] pensioners are granted equal rights with Estonian citizens.⁴²

However, there had still been no discussion of the final unresolved issue: the status of Paldisk. Retreating to another office in the Kremlin -- at this point, the meeting scheduled for ninety minutes had stretched beyond five hours -- Meri and Yeltsin agreed that Luik should remain in Moscow a second day to work out that agreement, as well. Clearly, though, the question of the term of Russian occupancy could be decided only by the Presidents. After a brief discussion, Yeltsin and Meri agreed that the Paldisk facility would be manned by Russian personnel during a dismantlement period lasting thirteen months after the troop withdrawal deadline, reverting to Estonian control on September 31, 1995.⁴³ The resolution of that problem lessened the time pressure on both sides, and the Paldisk agreement -- thoroughly vetted by Russian and Estonian legal and treaty experts -- was completed and signed nine days after the Meri-Yeltsin meeting.

On August 31, 1994, Estonia and Latvia marked the withdrawal of the final Russian military forces from their soil.

ENDNOTES

¹ The United States had never acknowledged the forcible incorporation of the Baltics into the USSR in 1940 as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. It thus remained for Washington only to "re"-establish formal diplomatic ties with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, a step accomplished on September 2, 1991. The final act was played out 4 days later when the USSR State Council bowed to reality and acknowledged that the three Baltic states now lay outside the borders of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

² Kristian Gerner and Stefan Hedlund, *The Baltic States and the End of the Soviet Empire* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 67.

³ Gerner and Hedlund, p. 169.

⁴ Steven Woehrel, "The Baltic States: U.S. Policy Concerns," Congressional Research Service Issue Brief (Washington: Library of Congress), p. 5.

⁵ ITAR-TASS, June 23, 1993. Yeltsin's support for the Baltics had a personal aspect, as a Soviet Communist official, he had vacationed in Latvia and become acquainted with some of the Baltic leaders who went on to head the early pro-independence movements of the late 1980s.

⁶ Juri Luik, interview by the author, February 21, 1996.

⁷ Lithuania had adopted a citizenship law in 1989 -- six months before declaring independence from the USSR -- which allowed anyone resident in the country to become a citizen within at most two years, just for the asking. When the initial offer expired in 1991, however, Lithuania replaced it with requirements including a language test and ten years of residence.

⁸ Saulius Girmius, "Lithuania's Foreign Policy," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Report*, Vol. 2, No. 35, September 1993, p. 24.

⁹ ITAR-TASS, April 5, 1993.

¹⁰ ITAR-TASS, June 23, 1993.

¹¹ *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, June 25, 1993.

¹² Saulius Girmius, "Lithuania's Foreign Policy," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Report*, Vol. 2, No. 35, September 1993, p. 28. West European reaction was also sharply critical, prompting the Estonians to submit the law to the Council of Europe and the CSCE for comment. Estonia subsequently modified the law in accordance with the European recommendations, but the lingering damage done -- both by the original law, and by Moscow's reaction -- further poisoned the atmosphere of the Russian-Estonian discussions.

¹³ Adrian Bridge, "In the Baltics, High Anxiety," *The Independent*, April 1994.

¹⁴ *Ibid*. Following formal protests, Russian officials hurried to clarify that Kozyrev had been referring to countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States -- a grouping that did not include the Baltics. But the damage to the psychological atmosphere surrounding the withdrawal talks was already done, in much the same way that Estonia's redraft of the Law on Aliens never fully erased the impression of anti-Russian bias that the initial draft had conveyed.

¹⁵ N. Musiyenko, "Estonia Stands Its Ground, and So Does Russia," *Pravda*, March 10, 1994, p. 1.

¹⁶ Carl Bildt, "The Baltic Litmus Test," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1994, p. 72.

¹⁷ Strobe Talbott, interview by the author, March 26, 1996.

¹⁸ Nicholas Burns, interview by the author, February 20, 1996.

¹⁹ The amendments in question were contained in P.L. 102-511 (The Freedom Support Act) as well as foreign aid appropriations legislation for FY1993 (P.L. 102-391). Amendments linking continued aid to the troop withdrawal were adopted in appropriations for FY1994 and FY1995, as well. The legislation required the President to certify that "substantial withdrawal" had occurred, or that a timetable for withdrawal had been reached between Russia and the Baltic states.

²⁰ Nicholas Burns, interview by the author, February 20, 1996.

²¹ Amb. Ojars Kalnins, interview by the author, March 1, 1996.

²² Nicholas Burns, interview by the author, February 20, 1996.

²³ Author's interviews with Nicholas Burns, February 20, 1996 and Amb. Ojars Kalnins, March 1, 1996.

²⁴ In other meetings, diplomats from Germany and Sweden provided their capitals' view on the benefits of the Skrunda agreement. During the visit, U.S. officials agreed to provide funding for the demolition of an uncompleted 12-story radar tower that dominated the countryside around Skrunda; the Latvian delegation stressed the importance

of the demolition as a visible demonstration to the Latvian people that the Skrunda agreement was not a one-sided deal

²⁵ Amb Ojars Kalnins, interview by the author, March 1, 1996

²⁶ Steven Wohrel, *The Baltic States US Policy Concerns*, Congressional Research Service Issue Brief (Washington Library of Congress), September 20, 1995

²⁷ Juri Luik, interview by the author, February 21, 1996

²⁸ U S officials had initially identified Tallinn as the ideal site for the President's Baltic visit, to increase the pressure on Russia to withdraw its troops. The stop was changed to Riga when White House advance men discovered that the main runway at Tallinn's airport was too short to accommodate Air Force One

²⁹ Interview with Nicholas Burns, February 20, 1996

³⁰ Interview with Juri Luik, February 21, 1996

³¹ Interview with Nicholas Burns, February 20, 1996

³² Transcript of Press Conference by President Clinton and President Yeltsin, White House Press Office, Naples, Italy, July 10, 1994

³³ Juri Luik, interview by the author, February 21, 1996

³⁴ U S -Swedish cooperation was a vital component of the effort to help push the Baltic withdrawal issue across the finish line. In a 1994 White House meeting, President Clinton and visiting Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt agreed that Bildt would contact Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev and Estonian officials to try to facilitate progress in the talks. Nicholas Burns interview by the author, February 20 and April 30, 1996, Background Briefing By Senior Administration Official White House Press Office, Washington, July 27, 1994

³⁵ Juri Luik, interview by the author, February 21, 1996

³⁶ Accounts in the Russian and Estonian media characterized the Malk-Churkin meetings as "fruitless" and yielding "no substantive results"

³⁷ Juri Luik, interview by the author, February 21, 1996

³⁸ Luik interview, February 21, 1996

³⁹ Luik interview, February 21, 1996

⁴⁰ Luik interview, February 21, 1996

⁴¹ Because of the unexpected rush to complete this second agreement, there was no Estonian-language version of the text, President Meri signed only the Russian variant. This became an issue with domestic critics of the agreement in Estonia, who contended that Meri had been pressured by Yeltsin and Kozyrev into accepting a deal that favored Russia because the Estonian delegation in Moscow did not fully understand the nuances of the Russian-language text

⁴² ITAR-TASS, July 27, 1994

⁴³ Juri Luik, interview by the author, February 21, 1996